

The following is a specially-made translation from a most remarkable Swedish Novel dealing with character development. This constitutes the first chapter.

GÖSTA BERLING—THE MINISTER.

SELINA LAGERLÖF.

There was the minister in the pulpit at last. The congregation lifted their heads. There he was indeed, after all. To-day the sermon would not be omitted as it had been the case last Sunday and the Sundays before.

The minister was young, highly grown, slender and strikingly handsome. Had they put a helmet on his head and dressed him with breast-plate and sword, he would have fitted for a model for the marble statue of the finest Athenian.

The minister had the deep eyes of the poet, and the round, firm chin of the general; everything about him was beautiful, fine, full of expression and inspired with genius and spiritual life.

The people in the church felt as conquered when they saw him thus before themselves. They were better used to see him come reeling out of the tavern with his friends, the Colonel Beerencrentz with the dense white moustache, and the strong Captain Christian Bergh.

He had drunk so terribly that he had not been able to discharge his duty for some weeks, and the congregation had to complain of him, first at the Dean, and then at the Bishop and Canon.

Now the bishop himself had come to make a thorough examination. He sat in the altar place, the golden bishop's cross sparkled on his breast, and round about him there sat the members of chapter house and all parsons of the neighbourhood.

There could be no doubt any more that the behaviour of the minister had surpassed the limits of the allowable. At

that time, in the twenties of the last century, drinking in itself was not condemned, but this man had neglected his duty through drunkenness, and would lose his situation now.

He stood in the pulpit and waited while the last verse of the song, "We all believe in one God" was sung.

While he was standing there, the certainty seized him that he had only enemies in the church—enemies on all benches. Among the gentry on the balconies, among the peasants in the nave, among the candidates for confirmation, on the altar-place he had enemies, only enemies. An enemy blew the organ. On the bench of the superior there were only enemies. They all hated him, from the smallest children who were carried to church, to the door-ward, an old stiff soldier who had fought at Leipsic.

The minister might have fallen on his knees and implored their pardon.

But in the next moment heavy rage penetrated him. He knew well how he had been when he, a year ago, mounted the pulpit for the first time. At that time he had been a man of whom nobody could tell something bad, and now he stood here and looked on that man with the golden cross, who had come to sit in judgment on him. While he spoke the preliminary words one wave of blood after the other rose into his face: this was the rage.

It was true, indeed, that he drank, but who had the right to accuse him of it? Had his accusers looked at the parsonage in which he ought to live? Close up to the windows the dark pinewood surrounded it like a gloomy wall. It trickled damp down from the blackened ceiling, on the walls covered with mould. Did not he require the warming brandy not to lose courage there when the rain and the whirling snow came in through the cracked windows, and the neglected field would not yield bread enough to keep the hunger off?

He was a minister as they deserved him. They all were drinkers. Why should he constrain himself? The widower who had buried his wife, got drunk at the funeral repast; the father who had his child baptized, had a wassail afterwards. The church-goers drank on their way home, so that most of them came home drunk. For them a dipsomaniac minister was good enough.

On his travels in duty, when he had to drive for miles in

his thin cloak across the frozen lakes, on which all cold winds had a meeting place, when he had to steer in storm and rain, his rocking boat on the same lakes, when he, in a snow-drift, had to alight from his sledge and make a path through house-high snows for the horse, or when he had to wade through moors, then he had learned to love the brandy.

The days of the year had dragged along in a heavy gloom. The peasant and the proprietor of the manor had been bound with their thoughts on the ground all day long, but in the evening their spirits had shaken off their fetters, the brandy had freed them. Flashes of thought came, the heart grew warm, life appeared beautiful, the song was full of sound harmony, the roses smelled sweetly. The guest room of the tavern had then become to him a flower garden of the south; grapes of vine and olives hung over his head, marble-pictures sparkled in the dark bower, sages and poets wandered under palms and plane trees.

No, he, the minister in the pulpit, knew that one could not bear life in this part of the country without the brandy. All his audience knew it, and now they wanted to sit in justice on him.

They wanted to divest him of his clergyman's gown, because he had come drunken into their house of the Lord. Oh, had all these men, conscious or unconscious, another god than the brandy?

He was ready with the introduction and bent down to say the Lord's Prayer.

Breathless silence ruled in the church during the prayer. But all of a sudden the minister seized with both his hands the ribbons that tied his gown. It seemed to him as if the whole congregation, with the bishop on their head, was creeping along the pulpit stairs to tear it away from him. He was lying on his knees and did not turn his head, but he felt how they tore at it, and he saw so distinctly the bishop, with the canons, the clergymen, the superiors, the sexton and the whole congregation work at it, to tear the gown away from him. And he could imagine so distinctly how they would all tumble one upon the other as soon as the ribbons would give way, and how the whole row of the standers below, who could not get at the gown themselves, but only held the coat-tails of those who were standing before them,

would likewise fall on their backs. He saw it so distinctly before himself that he could not help smiling, although he lay praying on his knees; but in the same moment cold sweat came on his forehead. It was horrid after all.

He should be cast away on account of the brandy! A deposed clergyman! Was there anything more wretched on earth?

He should go begging on the high-roads, lie drunken on the brim of ditches, have only rags on his body, and converse with vagabonds.

The prayer was over. He was to preach. At this moment a thought inflamed him that made the words die away on his lips. This was the last time that he was allowed to stand in the pulpit and announce the word of God.

The last time! This moved the preacher. He forgot everything, the brandy and the bishop. He did but think that he must use the opportunity and bear testimony in honour of God.

The church with all its audience seemed to be swallowed up, the roof to disappear, and he himself look into heaven. He was standing alone, quite alone in the pulpit, his spirit lifted up into the sky that was opened over him, his harmonious voice swelled to an unpresaged strength, and he announced God's glory.

He was a man of inspiration. He did not think any more of his carefully-worked-out sermon. The thoughts came over him like a flock of tame doves. It seemed to him as if not he himself was speaking any more, but he comprehended also that this was the highest on earth, and that nobody could attain a greater splendour or a higher magnificence than he who was announcing here God's glory.

As long as the fiery tongue of inspiration was hovering over his head he spoke, but when it had faded away and the roof sunk again, the flower came back to its place from the depth, he bent down and wept, for he felt that life had given him just now his best hour and that it was at an end.

After church the visitation and church assembly took place. The Bishop asked whether the congregation had to make complaint of their preacher.

The minister was no longer full of rage and defiance as before the sermon. He was ashamed, and bent his head.

Now all the miserable brandy stories would come to light. But it did not happen. At the round table in the council chamber it remained silent.

The minister looked up. He looked at the sexton first. No, this man remained silent. Then the superiors, the peasants, the farmers, all were silent. They had pressed their lips together, and looked embarrassed down on the board.

"They are waiting, all, till somebody begins," thought the minister. One of the superiors cleared his throat.

"I think we have a good minister," he said.

"Your honour have heard yourself how he preaches," interrupted the sexton.

The Bishop mentioned the repeated omissions of the services.

"The minister can be ill just as well as other people," said the peasants.

The Bishop hinted that the manner of life of the minister had displeased them.

They defended him unanimously. There was no danger with their minister; he was so very young after all. No, would he only always preach as to-day they would not even exchange him for the Bishop.

Where there is no accuser there is also no judge.

The minister's heart grew soft, and the blood streamed lightly through his veins. He was no longer surrounded by foes, then. He had won them when he had thought it least. He could remain a clergyman!

After the visitation, the bishop, the canons, the parsons, and the people of rank took their dinner at the parsonage.

A neighbour had prepared everything for the feast, for the minister was unmarried. She had ordered everything of its best, and the parsonage appeared to him no longer so miserable. The long table had been dressed outside under the pines, and made a solemn impression with its white tablecloth, the blue and white service, the sparkling glasses, and the daintily-folded serviettes.

Two wavering birches formed a triumphal arch before the door; the floor was strewn with finely-cut juniper branches; a cross hung on the top of the house; flowers smelt sweetly in all rooms; the smell of mould had been

driven out, and the green panes glittered lightly in the sunshine.

He was heartily glad, the minister; he thought that he would never drink again.

There was not one at the dinner-table who was not glad. The generous had forgiven, and rejoiced in it, and the canons and clergymen were glad that there had not been a scandal.

The good bishop lifted his glass and made a speech. He said that he had begun the journey with a heavy heart, for many a bad rumour had reached him. He had gone out to meet a Saulus, but, behold! the Saulus had already turned a Paulus, who would do more than they all. And the religious man praised the rich gifts that the Lord had granted to their young brother in Christ. He was not to boast of them, but strain all his strength and be careful of himself, as he has to who carries an exceedingly heavy, precious burden on his shoulders.

This dinner the minister did not drink too much, and yet he was intoxicated. The great, the unexpected, happiness rose into his head. Heaven had let the fiery tongue of inspiration flame over him; men had given him love. The blood still mantled feverishly hot and fast through his veins when the evening came and his guests departed. He was sitting up in his room till late in the night, and let the cool air of the night stream through the open window to cool the feverish feeling of happiness, the sweet disquietness that did not let him sleep.

Suddenly he heard a voice.

"Are you awake, clergyman?"

A man came across the lawn towards the window. The minister looked up and recognised Captain Christian Bergh, one of his faithful boon companions—an errant knight without house or possession. He was, this Christian, a giant in growth and strength, tall as Gurlitta (a mountain in Werm-land), and as stupid as a mountain giant.

"Of course, I am still awake, Captain Christian," the minister answered. "Do you think that I could sleep in such a night?"

Listen to what the Captain tells him! The giant had had his forebodings; he had understood that the minister would have to be afraid of drinking in the future. He would

have no peace any more, for the gentlemen who had once been here might come again, and deprive him of his office if he drank.

But now Captain Christian had laid his heavy hand on the work. He had provided that these canons would come no more, neither they nor the bishop. For the future the minister can drink with his friends as much as he likes.

Listen what feat he had accomplished, he, Christian Bergh, the strong captain!

When the bishop and the two canons had mounted their carriage, and the doors had been carefully shut behind them, he himself had mounted the coach-box and had driven them one or two miles in the light summer night.

And there Christian Bergh had made the venerable gentlemen feel how loose life is in the human body. He had made the horses shy and rave along wildly. This was good for the gentlemen who would not suffer that an honest man got drunk.

Do you think that he drove on the high-road; do you think that he saved them shocks? He drove over ditches and stubble-fields; he drove in dizzy gallop down the steep hills; he drove along the sea bank, so close that the water washed the wheels; he had almost stuck in the moor. They went over the barren mountains, so that horses almost glided down the precipices. And the bishop and the two gentlemen were sitting with pale faces behind the leather curtains and murmured prayers. Such a bad drive they had never yet made.

Imagine the faces when they, alive, indeed, but shaken and dashed about like hail-stones in a leather bag, arrived at the poste in Rissater.

"What does this mean, Captain Christian?" asked the bishop when he opened the door for them.

"This means that the bishop may think twice about it before he comes again on a visitation to Gôsta Berling," answered Captain Christian. He had well prepared the words, and learnt them by heart, not to be put out.

"Give Gôsta Berling my love," said the bishop, "and tell him that neither I nor any other bishop will any more come to see him."

Look, this feat the strong Captain Christian tells the

minister at the open window in the summer night. For he had only taken the horses to the poste and hurried at once to the parsonage to tell the minister this news.

"Now you can be at ease, brother of my heart," he said at last.

"O, Captain Christian!" With a pale face the gentlemen sat behind the leather curtains, but the face of the minister appears very much paler in the light summer night. "O, Captain Christian!"

The minister even lifted his arm for a blow into the stupid, rough face of the giant, but he controlled himself. He slammed the window, stopped short in the middle of the room, and shook his twisted fist upwards.

He, over whom the fiery tongue of inspiration had flamed, who had been allowed to announce God's glory, he was thinking now that God had played with him.

Would not the bishop think that Captain Christian had acted by his orders? Would he not be convinced that he had dissimulated and lied the whole day? Now the inquest would be carried on earnestly and he deprived of his office.

When the morning came the minister had disappeared from the parsonage. He would not stay to defend himself. God had played with him. God would not help him. He knew he would be dismissed. God wanted it. He had better go at once.

It was Gôsta Berling's first misfortune; it was not the last. For the foals who will neither stand the spurs nor the whip life is difficult. At every harm that is done them they shy and run towards the yawning abyss. When the way is stony and the drive laborious, they have no other counsel than to upset the carriage and rave wildly along.